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What is Leadership:

Person, result, position, purpose or process, or all or none of these?

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What is leadership?

Research into leadership – at least in written form – can be traced back to Plato in the West and Sun Tzu in the East but we do not seem to be any nearer a consensus as to its basic meaning, let alone whether it can be taught or its moral effects measured and predicted, than we were well over two millennia ago. This cannot be because of a dearth of interest or material: on 29 October 2003 when one of the authors first tried to answer the question 'what is leadership?' there were 14,139 items relating to 'Leadership' on Amazon.co.uk for sale. Assuming you could read these at the rate of one per day it would take almost 39 years just to read the material, never mind write anything about leadership or practice it. Just two months later that number had increased by 3 per cent (471 items) to 14,610. Assuming this increase was annualized we could look forward to just under 20,000 items by the beginning of 2005, 45,000 by 2010, and 100,000 by 2015. In fact in January 2015 there were 126,149 items so the increase is exponential. It should be self-evident that we do not need more 'lists' of leadership competences or skills because leadership research appears to be anything but incremental in its approach to 'the truth' about leadership: the longer we spend looking at leadership the more complex the picture becomes.

Traditionally, leadership is defined by its alleged opposite: management. Management is concerned with executing routines and maintaining organizational stability – it is

essentially concerned with control; leadership is concerned with direction setting, with novelty and is essentially linked to change, movement and persuasion. Another way to put this is that management is the equivalent of *déjà vu* (seen this before), whereas leadership is the equivalent of *vu jàdé* (never seen this before). Management implies that managers have seen it all before and simply need to respond correctly to the situation by categorizing it and executing the appropriate process. Leadership implies that leaders have never seen anything like it before and must therefore construct a novel strategy. But this division is often taken to mean that different people are necessary to fill the different roles – hence anyone relegated to the role of 'mere' manager cannot be considered as bringing anything unique to the party – after all, their task is limited to the mechanical one of recognizing situations and applying pre-existing processes. That most roles actually require both recognition and invention should also be clear.

Another way of approaching the problem might be to consider what the most popular textbooks have to say on the issue. When one of the authors did this in 2003 (Grint, 2005a) the top four selling general review texts on leadership were Hughes *et al*. (1999), Northouse (1997), Wright (1996) and Yukl (1998). Apart from noting the variegated properties of their definitions I was, and we are, left more rather than less confused by them. Leadership does seem to be defined differently and even if there are some similarities the complexities undermine most attempts to explain why the differences exist. That is to say, that we know differences exist but we remain unable to construct a consensus about the concept. However, the dissensus seemed to hang around four areas of dispute, leadership defined as: *person, result, position,* and *process*. Ten years later while the fourfold typology has proved useful the paper by

Kempster et al (2011) rightly pointed out that it seemed to omit the very 'purpose' of leadership and we have included that as a separate element.

The rest of this chapter focuses upon these five approaches and we conclude with an explanation for the problem of diversity and a way of constraining its effects. We hesitate to use the word 'resolution' because the explanation actively inhibits any resolution, but it does enable us to establish some parameters that we might use to understand why the differences exist in the first place. In other words, this does not provide a first step towards a consensus but a first step towards understanding why a consensus might be unachievable. Moreover, the point is not simply to redescribe the varieties of interpretation but to consider how this affects the way leadership is perceived, enacted, recruited and supported. For example, if organizations promote individuals on the basis of one particular interpretation of leadership then that approach will be encouraged and others discouraged – but it may well be that other interpretations of leadership are critical to the organization's success. Hence the importance of the definition is not simply to delineate a space in a language game and it is not merely a game of sophistry; on the contrary, how we define leadership has vital implications for how organizations work – or don't work.

Let us first generate the taxonomy of leadership that does not claim universal coverage but it should encompass a significant proportion of our definitions of leadership. Moreover, the typology is not hierarchical: it does not claim that one definition is more important than another and, contrary to the consensual approach, it is constructed upon foundations that *may* be mutually exclusive. In effect, we may have to choose which form of leadership we are talking about rather than attempt to elide the differ-

ences. It is however, quite possible that empirical examples of leadership embody elements of all five forms. Thus we are left with five major approaches:

- Leadership as Person: is it WHO 'leaders' are that makes them leaders?
- Leadership as Result: is it WHAT 'leaders' achieve that makes them leaders?
- Leadership as Position: is it WHERE 'leaders' operate that makes them leaders?
- Leadership as Purpose: is it WHY 'leaders' lead that makes them leaders?
- Leadership as Process: is it HOW 'leaders' get things done that makes them leaders?

All these aspects are 'ideal types', following Weber's (see Grint, 1998: 102-3) assertion that no such 'real' empirical case probably exists in any pure form, but this does enable us to understand the phenomenon of leadership better, and its attendant confusions and complexities, because leadership means different things to different people. This is therefore a heuristic model, not an attempt to carve up the world into 'objective' segments that mirror what we take to be reality. We will suggest, having examined these five different approaches to leadership, that the differences both explain why so little agreement has been reached on the definition of leadership and why this is important to the execution and analysis of leadership. Finally we use the work of Lacan to ask whether 'leadership' is so porous in meaning because it is an 'empty-signifier' – a vehicle capable of embodying all kinds of meanings and fantasies – hence its persistence, resilience and contested nature.

Defining leadership

Person-based leadership

Is it who you are that determines whether you are a leader or not? This, of course resonates with the traditional traits approach: a leader's character or personality. We might consider the best example of this as the charismatic, to whom followers are attracted because of the charismatic's personal 'magnetism'. Ironically, while a huge effort has been made to reduce the ideal leader to his or her essence – the quintessential characteristics or competencies or behaviours of the leader – the effort of reduction has simultaneously reduced its value. It is rather as if a leadership scientist had turned chef and was engaged in reducing a renowned leader to his or her elements by placing them in a saucepan and applying heat. Eventually the residue left from the cooking could be analysed and the material substances divided into their various chemical compounds. Take, for instance, Wofford's (1999: 525) claim that laboratory research on charisma would develop a 'purer' construct 'free from the influences of such nuisance variables as performance, organizational culture and other styles of leadership'. What a culture-free leader would like is anyone's guess and this attempted purification is literally *reductio ad absurdum*: a pile of chemical residues might have considerable difficulty persuading other people to follow it (although this is what drug addiction is framed around). At its most basic the 'essence' of leadership, *qua* an individual leader, leaves out the followers and without followers you cannot be a leader. Indeed, this might be the simplest definition of leadership: 'having followers'.

A complementary or contradictory case can also be made for defining leadership generally as a collective, rather than an individual, phenomenon. In this case the focus usually moves from an individual formal leader to multiple informal leaders. We

might, for example, consider how organizations actually achieve anything, rather than being over-concerned with what the CEO has said should be achieved. Thus we could trace the role of informal opinion-leaders in persuading their colleagues to work differently, or to work harder, or not to work at all and so on. This does not necessarily imply that everyone is a leader – though it might do – but rather that a relatively small number of people are crucial for ensuring organizations survive and succeed – and this minority or critical mass, may or may not coincide with those in formal leadership positions (Gronn, 2003; Jones, 2014; Ridderstrale, 2002: 11).

Although person-based theories of leadership may vary in emphasis, they do tend to hold one thing in common: the person the theory is based upon is usually a naked person. Search as one may for a definition of leadership that encompasses anything beyond the human, the most likely trail leads back to the comforting figure of a *homo sapien*. Latour (1988), for example, makes a robust case for Actor-Network theory with his suggestion that a naked Napoleon would have been markedly less effective than a clothed Napoleon, surrounded by clothed soldiers with weapons. Actor-Network Theory has a history and origin that need not detain us here (see Callon, 1986; Latour, 1993; Law and Hassard, 1999) but it suggests both that wholly social relations are inconceivable – because all humans rely upon and work through non-human forms, through hybrids – and that humans distinguish themselves from animals, amongst other things, on the basis of the durability or obduracy of their relations. That is, they encase their social relations into material forms. This does not mean that material forms determine things but that these material forms are an effect of the relations.

Does this imply anything about the link between hybridity and agency? We do not need to enter the debate about whether the future is destined to be dominated by robots or Cyborgs here (see Brooks, 2002; Friedland, 2015; Geary, 2002; Haraway, 1991) to note the increasing degree of hybridity amongst 'people'. In Actor-Network terms agency sits in the hybrids, rather than located within either the humans or the non-humans whose relationship forms the hybrid actant.

In 'essence', we might conclude that the search for an essence is irrelevant because the important element is the hybrid not the elements that comprise the hybrid, nor any alleged network essence. If this is valid then 'human' leaders should be reconsidering how they can strengthen the links in the hybrid networks not because non-humans do not embody volition but because non-human leadership is as mythically pure as human leadership. And there lies the (essentially contested) rub – it isn't the consciousness of leaders that makes them leaders or makes them effective, it's their hybridity; not how they think but how they are linked.

Result-based leadership

It might be more appropriate, however, to take the result-based approach because whoever is leading and whatever the links, without results there is little support for leadership. There may be thousands of individuals who are 'potentially' great leaders but if that potential is never realized, if no results of that leadership are forthcoming, then it would be logically difficult to speak of these people as 'leaders' – except in the sense of 'failed' or 'theoretical' leaders': people who actually achieve little or nothing. On the other hand, there is a tendency (e.g., Ulrich *et al*., 1999) to focus on results as the primary criteria for leadership but there are two other issues that need fur-

ther examination here: first, how do we attribute the collective results of an organization to the actions of the individual leader? (Antonakis, et al, 2010). Second, assuming that we can causally link the two, do the methods by which the results are achieved play any role in determining the presence of leadership?

The first issue – that we can trace effects back to the actions of individual leaders – is deeply controversial. On the one hand there are several studies from a psychological approach that suggest it is possible to measure the effect of leaders (e.g., Gerstner and Day, 1997) but more sociologically inclined authors often deny the validity of such measures (e.g., Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003). A related controversy suggests that this dispute is itself deeply encased within most traditional approaches to leadership and implies that leaders embody agency. Lee and Brown (1994) suggest that to be human is to possess agency but this, of course, begs the question of agency itself. Volition is the exercise of freewill or conscious choice, as opposed to determinism, hence, if human action is determined (by coercion, biological genes or technology or whatever) then the intentional element of leadership is removed and we may have a problem in determining individual responsibility. In effect, we may have results but no responsibility and therefore no leadership: thus the legal defence enacted by those who regard themselves as acting under duress. In fact, taking this approach to its logical conclusion in the case of biologically inherited characteristics would be to suggest that those leaders with 'criminal genes' are not responsible for their leadership of criminal gangs, even if the results are significant in terms of people killed or money stolen and so on. And if we insist that action is determined by biological requirements over which individuals have no volitional control then we might even consider looking for the leadership gene that is making them act to some degree or other (De Neve

et al, 2013).

One could also argue that leadership can be linked to fatalism. For example, Nelson, Churchill, Hitler, Martin Luther King, Joan of Arc and General Patton, to name but a few, are all associated with significant achievements – for better or for worse – but all believed themselves to have been chosen by fate for a particular mission on earth. This fatalism induces enormous self-confidence and facilitates what others would regard as dangerous risk-taking. Yet this stymies our account of leadership – for now leadership is divorced from volition. In effect, if leaders believe themselves to have no choice and no freedom of action, because of a particular belief structure or threat, or religion or whatever, then no matter what we, the observers, might decide, these leaders experience their leadership as non-volitional, as determined by forces beyond their control. In such approaches the role of the leader is not necessarily to cause things to happen but to act as 'hero' when events work out advantageously and to act as 'scapegoat' when things go wrong (Grint, 2010). But might this not be regarded as a form of collective psychosis, a position which holds that we receive our instructions directly from a pure and unmediated source of truth (Lacan, 1997)? In good times, we are sure we have the right messenger; in bad times we can send that person to the proverbial insane asylum and look for the next source of truth.

Meindl et al referred to this as the Romance of Leadership in which followers and onlookers regularly sought – and discovered – 'leadership' when events were going very well or very badly but rarely experienced any leadership when events were relatively calm, mundane and unexceptional (1985; 1995). So while Gemmill and Oakley (1997) conclude that leadership is probably just an 'alienating social myth' – an essentially contested concept if ever there was one – it might also be a convenient social

myth.

This brings us to the second issue at the heart of result-based leadership – does the process by which the results are achieved actually matter? Most certainly, the office or school bully who successfully 'encourages' followers to comply under threat of punishment becomes a leader under the results-based criteria – providing they are successful in their coercion and its effects. But such a results-based approach to leadership immediately sets it at odds with some perspectives that differentiate leaders according to some putative distinction between leadership – which is allegedly non-coercive – and all other forms of activity that we might regard as the actions of a 'bully' or a 'tyrant' and so on. Northouse (1997: 7–8), for instance, examines 'leaders who use coercion [such as] … Adolf Hitler [and] Jim Jones'. But he then suggests that we should distinguish between coercion and leadership and thus writes a large proportion of human 'leadership' out of view by implying that 'Leaders who use coercion are interested in their own goals and seldom interested in the wants and needs of subordinates.' Yet, Command, as a decision-style seems to be entirely appropriate and legitimate in crisis conditions (Grint, 2005b; 2010). A review by Doh (2003) of six leading leadership scholars reflects this line and suggests that the use of 'unethical' methods negates the claim to 'leadership'. Since what counts as 'ethical' behaviour is not discussed this leaves us stuck in the contestable ethical treacle: it could be argued that Hitler was unethical and therefore was not a leader or it could be argued, as suggested above, that since Hitler managed to align his followers' 'ethics' in line with his own the issue is not the pursuit of some indefinable ethical position but the mutual alignment of what counts as 'ethics'. But, as we suggested above, not everyone accepts that the most important issue is the results rather the methods, so does focusing upon the position by which leadership is recognized offer a radically different per-

spective?

Position-based leadership

Perhaps the most traditional way of configuring leadership is to suggest that it is really concerned with a spatial position in an organization of some kind – formal or informal. Thus we can define leadership as the activity undertaken by someone whose position on a vertical, and usually formal, hierarchy provides them with the resources to lead. These are 'above us', 'at the top of the tree', 'superordinates' and so on. In effect, they exhibit what we might call 'Leadership-in-Charge'. This is how we normally perceive the heads of vertical hierarchies, whether CEOs or military generals or Head Teachers or their equivalents. These people lead from their positional control over large networks of subordinates and tend to drive any such required change from the top. That 'drive' also hints at the coercion that is available to those in-charge: a general can order executions, a judge can imprison people and a CEO can discipline or sack employees and so on.

A related aspect of this vertical structuring is what appears to be the parallel structuring of power and responsibility. Since the leader is 'in charge', then presumably he or she can ensure the enactment of his or her will. But we should be wary of this parallel universe that irreversibly links a hierarchy of labels to a hierarchy of power because there are good grounds for linking them both in obverse and in reverse. That is to say, that the hierarchy of power simultaneously inverts the hierarchy of labels. While a formal leader may *demand* obedience from his or her subordinates – and normally acquire it because, *inter alia*, of the resource imbalance – that obedience is never guaranteed. In fact, following Lukes (1979), one could suggest that power encompasses a

counterfactual possibility, a subjunctivist verb tense rather than just a verb – it could have been otherwise. Indeed, one could well argue that power is not just a cause of subordinate action but also a consequence of it: if subordinates do as leaders demand then, and only then, are leaders powerful.

The limitations of restricting leadership to a position within a vertical hierarchy are also exposed when we move to consider Leadership-in-Front, a horizontal approach, in which leadership is largely unrelated to vertical hierarchies and is usually informally constituted through a network or a heterarchy (a flexible and fluid hierarchy). Leadership-in-Front might be manifest in several forms, and where it merges into Leadership-in-Charge might be at the penultimate rank at the bottom of a hierarchy. Indeed, the leadership abilities of low-level leaders may be critical in differentiating the success of armies, both in prior conflicts and in the current focus on 'strategic corporals' in the US Marine Corps (Krulak, 1999).

More commonly, though, we might conceive of Leadership-in-Front from a fashion leader – someone who is 'in front' of his or her followers, whether that is trends in clothing, music, business models or whatever. Conversing frequently with undergraduate business students, in our experience this is their most commonly held assumption about leadership and is often embodied in technology and lifestyle business leaders such as Steve Jobs or Mark Zuckerberg. These leaders provide guides to the mass of fashion-followers without any formal authority over them. But leading from the front also encompasses those who guide others, either a professional guide showing the way or simply whoever knows the best way to an agreed destination amongst a group of friends on a Sunday stroll; both guides exhibit leadership through their role in front

but neither is necessarily formally instituted into an official hierarchy.

Leadership-in-Front might also be provided in the sense of legitimizing otherwise prohibited behaviour. For instance, we might consider how Hitler's overt and public anti-Semitism legitimated the articulation of anti-Semitism by his followers. And again it has been suggested that acts such as suicide provide 'permission' by 'leaders-in-front' for others to follow, hence there are often spates of similar acts in quick succession almost as if the social behaviour operates as a biological epidemic (Gladwell, 2002).

Leadership along this positional dimension, then, differs according to the extent to which it is formally or informally structured, and vertically or horizontally constituted. Leadership-in-Charge implies some degree of centralizing resources and authority, while Leadership-in-Front implies the opposite. But with either position, doesn't the purpose mean more?

Purpose-based leadership

The purpose – or point – of leadership is an interesting approach and we are grateful to Kempster et al's (2010) article for alerting us to this lacuna in one of the author's original works (Grint, 2005a). Its origins might be said to lie in Plato's and Aristotle's teleological suggestions that differentiate between intrinsic purpose – what a thing is designed to do (for example Aristotle suggests an acorn's *telos* is to grow into an oak tree) – and extrinsic purpose – the aim that is ascribed to a thing (a pen is designed to write). Hegel's philosophy suggests that the purpose of humanity is to realize a perfect state – a model refracted in Marx's assumptions about the purpose of the proletariat. However, our 'purpose' here is to consider a leadership model where the purpose is what differentiates leadership from any other activity. Thus it embodies the possi-

bility that the results maybe meagre but the purpose is more important: take Malala Yousafzai for example, a Pakistani girl shot by the Taliban for promoting education amongst girls in October 2012. In terms of direct results manifest in an expansion of education for girls across the country, the results are indeed meagre. But in terms of the symbolic significance of her continued activism, the purpose crowds out the results. Moreover, the results approach is always limited by a subsequent temporal question: to misquote Chou en Lai on the significance of the French Revolution two centuries after the event: it's too early to tell the results of Malala's leadership (Yousafzai and Lamb, 2014).

Historically few leadership scholars have focused on purpose as the primary differentiator of leadership – though it forms the frame for much of the debate around Transformational and Transactional leadership (Burns, 1978) that is ironically one of the key developments in recent scholarship and underpins the work of Moore's (1997) Public Value initiative that sets the purpose of public services as a primary prerequisite for successful leadership.

The purpose of leadership also encompasses an overarching focus on the ethics of leadership. As we have already suggested, ethics are as contested as leadership but this does not mean that ethics are irrelevant. On the contrary, how leaders and followers grapple with the thorny issue of ethics seems to us to be critical. If complying absolutely with a set of absolute ethics was a pre-requisite for successful leadership then few of us would achieve much in the world because it is precisely when the ethics we abide by do not actually provide clear guidance that we need to consider the role of leadership. This arena, where the black and white dichotomies of ethical guidance

shades into grey, is the place where leadership is forged by those willing to engage in the world of leadership practice rather than leadership theory. Or, in the words of Sartre (1989), the world of 'dirty hands'.

Process-based leadership

The final approach we want to consider is based on an assumption that people that we attribute the term leadership to, act differently from non-leaders – that some people 'act like leaders' – but what does this mean? It could mean that the context is critical, or that leaders must be exemplary or that the attribution of difference starts early in the life of individuals, such that 'natural' leaders can be perceived in the school play grounds or on the sports field etc. But what is this 'process' differential? So are leaders those that allegedly embody the exemplary performance we require to avoid any hint of hypocrisy? And when sacrifice is required or new forms of behaviour demanded from followers is it exemplary leaders that are the most successful?

Perhaps, a counter-example is Admiral Nelson, an individual whose military successes were almost always grounded in a paradoxical situation wherein he demanded absolute obedience from his subordinates to naval regulations but who personally broke just about every rule in that same rule book (Grabsky, 1993). Yet Nelson's success was not simply a consequence of rule-breaking actions but also a result of his engagement with, and motivation of, his followers, most importantly his fellow officers in his battle fleet, his 'Band of Brothers' (Kennedy, 2001). Hence, at one level this process approach may encompass the specific skills and resources that motivate followers: rhetoric, coercion, bribery, exemplary behaviour, bravery and so on. Leader-

ship under this guise is necessarily a relational concept, not a possessional one. In other words, it does not matter whether you think you have great process skills if your followers disagree with you. Thus it may be that we can recognize leadership by the behavioural processes that differentiate leaders from followers, but this does not mean we can simply list the processes as universally valid across space and time. After all, we would not expect a second century Roman leader to act in the same way as a twenty-first century Italian politician, but neither would we expect an American Indian leader to act in a fashion indistinguishable from an American President (Warner, 2003). Yet it remains the case that most of our assumptions about leadership relate to our own cultural context rather than someone else's. In effect, the process approach to leadership is more concerned with how leadership works – the practices through which they lead – their rhetorical skill that entrances the followers, or their inducing of obedience through coercion or whatever happens to work. But is leadership just about securing consent or is dissent just as important?

Within many organizations, the perceived possession of power within the hierarchy is regarded as the principle foundation for leaders to coerce individuals into "doing the work". Employees may decide to consent *constructively* – believing it to be right, relevant and appropriate - or *destructively* – because the boss who knows best is telling them to do it, although it might be wrong or irrelevant or inappropriate. Subordinates who do disagree – dissenters - are often regarded as nothing more than 'disturbers of the peace' (Redding, 1985: 247). Despite Perrow (1979: 5-7,114) identifying a bureaucratic organization as possibly having many advantages for subordinates and society as a whole, he also identifies the potential inefficiencies and ethnocentrism that the terms such as 'teamwork', 'morale', 'loyalty' and 'cooperation', often work to

inhibit acts of dissent, however constructive. So why do leaders not encourage dissent?

Historically scholars have defined dissent along a negative trajectory (Graham, 1986; Hegstrom, 1995; Redding, 1985; Stewart, 1980; Westin, 1986), collectively implying dissent demonstrates dissatisfaction with the status quo; it is a voicing of objections and therefore a form of protest, deemed essentially as confrontational. Those in more senior positions in many organizations are uncomfortable with dissenters, because being openly criticized and questioned about their decisions, policies, processes and strategies, reveals that they are not perfect, and they therefore do not have all the answers, possibly revealing their weaknesses.

Other scholars suggest that dissent usually involves personal and principled morals (Dozier and Miceli, 1985; Sprague and Ruud, 1988) and is not always a protest or highly confrontational (Redding, 1985; Sprague and Ruud, 1988). Moreover, dissent can actually be useful, constructive and helpful (Grint, 2005a; Holt, 2015; Redding, 1985; Roberto, 2013) allowing subordinates a voice to enhance the organizational working environment (Sprague and Ruud, 1988) which can, in turn, potentially narrow 'the space between' (Uhl-Bien, 2012: xiv) the individual leaders and individual followers to build relationships alongside improving the organization's performance.

In tackling challenges and organizational change where strong collaboration is required, individuals in positions of leadership require relational interaction, which can be strengthened through appropriate dissent. Those undertaking leadership roles who do not give permission for appropriate dissent, are at risk of silencing professional

individuals who might have the answer, or part of the solution to improve the context being faced. The answer could already be within the organization, at the 'bottom of *this* box' (Holt, 2015), but without the encouragement of appropriate dissent it could go unnoticed and ignored.

Silence in organizations may be associated with shyness and respect for others, or an individual's strategy of avoiding embarrassment and confrontation (Perlow and Williams, 2003). However, more commonly, the message – verbally or non-verbally - being delivered from the top usually involves "if you don't make waves, keep quiet and do your job, you will keep your job and further your career". These hierarchical responses to individuals expressing dissent only encourage organizations to fall into a pathological culture of blame (Eilerman, 2006; Westrum, 1993), where individuals cover things up - "sweeping things under the carpet" - ignoring mistakes and resulting in destructive consent (Grint, 2005a).

An infamous example where employees felt silenced is the Deepwater Horizon disaster on 20 April 2010, which was contracted and managed by BP Plc. The culture of blame embedded in the organization caused employees to feel nervous about speaking up about safety issues, scenarios or mistakes in fear of being sanctioned or fired. BP was an organization under the previous leadership of John Browne, and then his protégé Tony Hayward, that appeared on the surface to be a world leader in deep-water oil exploration, production and hugely profitable; however, beneath the surface they were in fact 'drifting into failure' (Dekker, 2011:4), not focusing on the most important 'p' - the people who actually made the production happen to make the huge profits. On taking up the position of Chief Executive in 2007, Tony Hayward insisted

he was going to reform BP and focus on safety. However, nothing much changed (Sachs, 2012) with regards to the larger and more challenging issues being raised by dissenters, with only the easy part of safety being addressed: for example, hand rails, how to reverse park safely, lids on coffee cups – all visible, easy cheap fixes to be seen to be doing something. But BP were also at the forefront when it came to safety violations (Sachs, 2012), with BP answerable for 97 per cent of all wilful violations of worker safety in the oil industry between June 2007 and February 2010 (Reed and Fitzgerald, 2011: 134). During the investigations into the Deep Water Horizon rig, Henry Waxman led a United States House of Representative Energy and Commerce Committee that scoured over thirty thousand BP documents identifying evidence of a variety of risks that had been raised by dissenters on the rig but that had been ignored – swept under the carpet. Waxman reported back to Hayward and the Board of BP, 'There is not a single email or document that shows you paid even the slightest attention to the dangers at the well. You cut corner after corner to save a million dollars here and a few hours there. And now the whole Gulf Coast is paying the price'[1]. In summary, Hayward, and Browne before him, and their senior executives became victims of their own hubris, believing they had all the answers and could not fail, therefore taking more and more extreme risks, silencing their people into a culture of fear. This is a classic example of Prozac Leadership (Collinson, 2012) that metaphorically symbolizes the process of excessive positivity and social addiction between followers and leaders. Collinson argues that it is taken for granted in organizations that leaders are the ones with all the answers, skills and abilities to make the better decisions and provide the answers. Followers, on the other hand, should be submissive and carry out orders, keep quiet and just do their jobs. When these over-positive characteristics

[1] Broder, J. M. and Calmes, J. (2010). 'Chief of BP, contrite, gets a scolding by Congress'. *International Herald Times*, June 18, 2010.

are displayed in excess in an organization, there is a risk of a chasm between leader and follower, damaging relationships and therefore enhancing the five underlying principles to Prozac Leadership: 1. A leaders' reluctance to acknowledge and address difficult situations, ignoring bad news, leaving no room for questioning or dissent from followers who could be the expert with the answer; 2. If things do go wrong, the leaders are surprised – because they thought everything was going well - and therefore are not prepared; 3. Followers are discouraged from raising concerns, acknowledge mistakes or voice opinion or debate; 4. Leaders who communicate positive narratives that are unrelated to the realities fuel a distrust amongst followers, damaging open communication and learning, encouraging suspicion and scepticism; 5. A lack of open communication increases the lack of opportunities for lessons to be learnt from, with mistakes being repeated time and again, putting the organization at risk of failing.

The hidden costs of individuals feeling silenced and a lack of communication and inclusion in organizational decisions can run into billions of pounds/dollars/euros. BP is still paying fines and a compensation bill of over $70 billion dollars (and rising five years on). Beyond BP a Gallup survey in 2013[2] found an average of only 13 per cent of the world's working population were actively engaged (fully committed to their role) in their work, costing organizations globally in the region of £52 billion and £70 billion per year in the United Kingdom. This issue of disengagement and lack of support for dissenters in organizations is interlinked. If you take into consideration the origins of the word 'dissent', Kassing's (1997) work identifies its derivation from the Latin word *dissentire*, with *dis* meaning apart and *sentire* meaning feeling. Therefore,

[2] Gallup report *State of the Global Workplace Report* (2013)

its direct translation references the experience of "feeling apart". Within the context of an organization, dissent thus relates to an individual feeling apart from the organization, therefore disengaged. In the dictionary dissent is explained with the use of synonyms like disagree, dispute, conflict, and nonconcur, however Kassing (1998: 312) suggests that demonstrating the root meaning of the word being 'feeling apart' transcends the negative concept of conflict and rather suggests a duty to consider different strategies for individuals to express dissent so as to avoid disengagement. Therefore it could be argued that the part of the process to be adopted by leaders in organizations is to give employees permission to be constructive and active in their dissent strategies, to avoid the damaging, hidden costs of silence through destructive and passive dissent (Farrell and Rusbult, 1992).

However, if individuals feel like they have no voice – no relationships - a fear of being blamed if things go wrong, or fear of being made an example of, then their contributions become latent and hidden due to passivity: no dissent, means a lack of ideas, and a disengaged group of individuals, feeling neglected and therefore resigned that they cannot make a difference. The voicing of dissent is a method allowing individuals to better understand each other (whether a leader or a follower), the processes, the organization, and to explore actions and outcomes, whilst being respectful and empathetic.

There is a health warning to be respected with regards to dissent – dissent can be damaging if used inappropriately and not understood. Constant 'inappropriate' dissent has the potential of leading a collective or an organization towards anarchy with some dissenters intentionally being disruptive. For dissent to be useful, active and construc-

tive, individuals are required encouragement to explain why they disagree, possibly along with potential direct 'facts' and potential solutions.

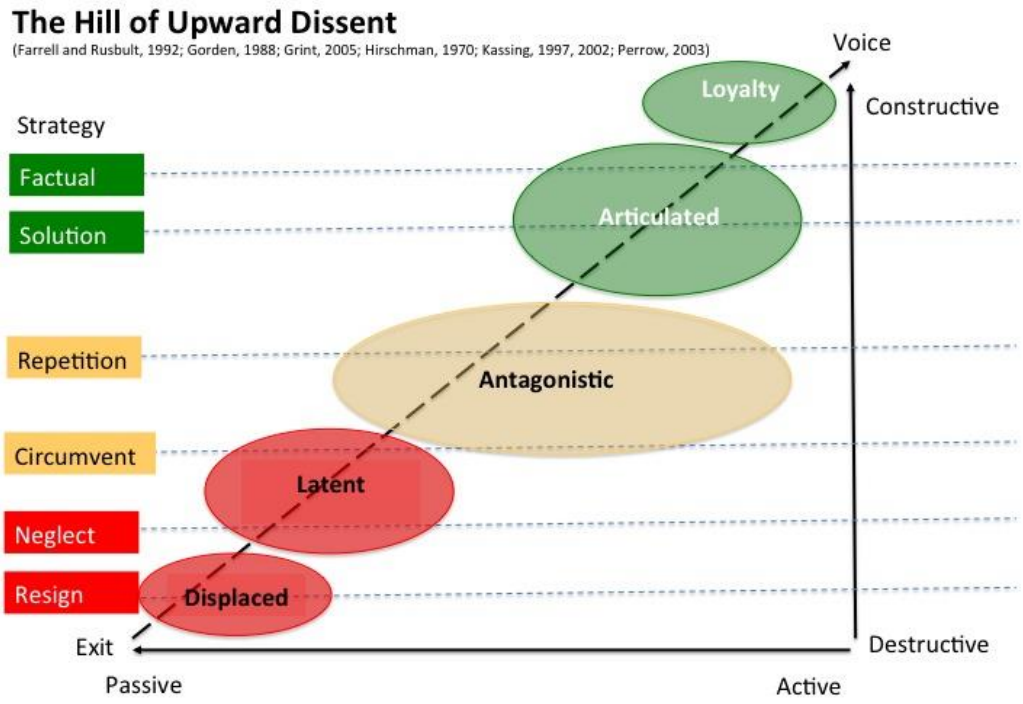
To better understand the effective and ineffective uses of dissent, Kassing's Employee Dissent Model (1997, 1998, 2002, 2005), and work by Redding (1985) and Roberto (2013) from the area of Communication Studies, have been considered and applied to leadership as a process in 'The Hill of Upward Dissent' (Figure x.x, below {Holt, 2015}). It is a heuristic model for understanding the role of dissent and how it can facilitate leaders and followers during times of challenge using a horizontal axis of Active and Passive and a vertical axis of Destructive and Constructive to capture the different aspects of dissent. The model demonstrates the different aspects of candour for effective dissent being at the 'top of the hill', with individuals in positions of authority working to encourage these constructive/active attitudes of dissent amongst a collective of subordinates. Successful leaders that build relationships and support individuals in constructive dissent, avoid the organization as a whole, 'slipping down the hill' and becoming antagonistic, passive, resisting and resigning from their responsibilities.

Employee dissent is always and will always be present within organizations (Holt, 2015; Kassing, 1997) of all types, and so therefore requires the leadership to appreciate the values and objectives of individuals (Tompkins and Chencey, 1985); and the desire of individuals to share opinions and ideas, even when contradictory or challenging (Gorden and Infante, 1987) - what Hirschman (1970) calls 'voice' - in order to avoid what he calls 'exit'. The 'loyalty' of the individual is a moderating variable that influences whether that person stays because they have a voice and feel engaged and included, or they exit (mentally or physically) because they feel silenced, neglect-

ed and disengaged (Hirschman, 1970).

The encouragement of active/constructive dissent within the leadership context provides a supportive atmosphere allowing all involved an opportunity to reflect on the truth of a challenge, consider a wider array of ideas, and ensure all voices have an opportunity to be heard through open and more developed relationships – narrowing the space between leaders and followers.

Figure XX



But perhaps there is a more radical take on leadership that goes beyond the problem

of dissent and suggests that leadership just acts as a convenient word to explain what appears inexplicable?

Fantasy leadership: to fill the empty vessel or find a new vessel?

50 years ago W.B. Gallie (1955/56) called power an Essentially Contested Concept (ECC) and suggested that many such concepts involved 'endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of the users' to the point where debates appeared irresolvable. For Gallie (1964: 187–8), 'Recognition of a given concept as essentially contested implies recognition of rival uses of it (such as oneself repudiates) as not only logically possible and humanly "likely", but as of permanent potential critical value to one's own use or interpretation of the concept in question.' Examples of ECCs are multiple, as are the attempts to resolve the contestation: Strine *et al*. (1990), consider Performance as an ECC; Kellow (2002) applies it to Sustainable Development; Bajpai (1999) uses it to analyse Security; Cohen (2000) takes Civil Society as an ECC; and finally terrorism is the subject of Smelser and Mitchell's (2002) application of an ECC.

The problem of evaluating leadership is exemplified by Jack Welch: was he 'the best' business leader of the 1990s because GE under his 'leadership' made more money than any other company or would GE have been this successful anyway and did his methods unnecessarily destroy hundreds of careers? We could equally argue that Sir Peter Bonfield, ex-CEO of BT, was 'the best' because despite losing over £30 billion it could be argued that he saved BT from bankruptcy. In other words, it is always possible to devise a way of measuring 'successful leadership' but the measures may not generate a consensus because they are neither objective nor do we all agree on the way to measure

success because our definitions and interpretations of leadership are ECCs.

The case we want to make as the chapter draws to a close is that leadership may actually hold no meaning and *because of this* positively overflows with meaning. Leadership is a great example of what is known in linguistics as a floating signifier, a signifier that in and of itself means very little, or nothing at all, but acts as a form of discursive relay that holds together all kinds of other chains of association (Žižek, 2009a).

In this sense leadership is not even a discourse. A discourse implies a particular form of socio-political meaning expressed via talk and text (Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007). Instead, we invite you to think of leadership metaphorically as a point of stitching in a quilt, the point at which the threads come together, are quilted into one another. Transposed to language, one can think of the quilting operation as potentially weaving together all kinds of different ideological and organizational discourses. This is what fascinated Lacan about floating signifiers – their potential to act as quilting points (or a *point de capiton*, in Lacanese). For Lacan, quilting points played a vital role in any analytical operation, "this point around which all concrete analysis of discourse must operate" (Lacan, 1997: 267).

Viewed as a quilting point one may therefore think of 'leadership' (as signifier) holding together regimes of discursive meaning. Laclau (2014) and Laclau and Mouffe (1985) conceptualised these regimes as hegemonic constellations. Drawing on something we think of as quite rigid and fixed (hegemony) in this context is playful yet also salient. What Laclau and Mouffe are conveying is this idea that discourse can become quite stable but nevertheless what we come to think of as stable meaning also shifts slowly

over time and indeed has the potential to explode quite suddenly and radically alter in meaning. Hence the idea of discursive hegemony encapsulates a certain healthy dose of realism concerning the obstinacy of power and yet also incorporates the possibility of radical change.

Leadership is a salient example of a discursive hegemonic constellation. Associated with 'great' traits for so long, the Second World War acted as a kind of disruption for 'leadership'. Previously attached to strong organisation and the capacity of individuals to motivate, leadership was now also associated with a chain of 'dark side' associations (Tourish and Pinnington, 2002) – charisma, obedience, worship, manipulation, genocide. In fact one could make a case that leadership enjoyed the dubious distinction of being synonymous with many of the horrors perpetuated within the 20th century, a period that even by human standards can be thought of as particularly violent (Eagleton, 2011).

It is only relatively recently, and in parallel with the rise in consumerist capitalism and neoliberal investment in the idea of individuals as autonomous, entrepreneurial subjects, that leadership has enjoyed a reinvention of sorts. In mass market business publications leadership is now a signifier closely tied with capitalist ideology, this notion that if individuals invest in their personal leadership capital then they will be able to 'transform' their environments, through a range of 'hard' and 'soft' techniques and behaviours (Tomlinson et al, 2013). 'Leadership' might of course imply a different set of associations – in socialism, social democracy, or even some form of hegemonic-ideological constellation yet to be imagined.

What differentiates leadership from other organising signifiers, such as management, is its libidinal charge. In other words, the very fact that leadership is so empty as a signifier should act as a clue that it is throbbing and overflowing with (eroticised) meaning. It is a signifier that acts as a receptacle for fantasy, in other words. By now the idea that leadership is a signifier attached to fantasising is well established. Ford and Harding (2007) and Ford et al (2008), for example, in their study of leadership development programmes, discovered that participants entered development (discursively) stuffed full of heroic and libidinally charged notions of leadership and what it means to be a leader. But of course we do not need academic studies to prove the point, only a very cursory engagement with our own personal and cultural identifications. Star Wars, Clint Eastwood, John Wayne, Lord of the Rings: we are socialised into consuming images and narratives of heroism-leadership in a way we are not with management. Lord of the Rings re-written as a tale of a competent manager designing an efficient and lean transportation system to dispose of a ring of untold power, outsmarting the 'dark' and charismatic, but hopelessly disorganised leadership of Sauron (everyone knows you don't centralise your operations in just Mordor and Isengard – you outsource!) would not make for as intriguing a plotline, perhaps.

It is unlikely that most organisations feature many examples of truly inspirational or heroic acts but this signifier 'leadership' does allow for fantasies of heroism to be attributed to otherwise fairly decent but mundane people and acts (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003).

Returning to Lacan, we might conceptualise fantasy as the narratives and images subjects construct in order to paper over the cracks present in the symbolic fabric of lan-

guage itself (Lacan, 1966-1967). As human beings we have no choice but to be socialised into the world of language, as it is language that governs our basic human relations. And yet language is a flawed concept, incapable of expressing the totality of human feelings or experiences (Driver, 2009). Ultimately, language is always someone else's language, someone else's design. Subjectively, something always escapes language. And for Lacan, this little something is the range and complexity of human desire. Language, via fantasy, can misdirect desire but it can never capture or satisfy desire. Hence why fantasies tend to leave subjects slightly dissatisfied – they push us to the edges of the satisfactoriness of language but never deliver completion.

For Lacanians, our contemporary, post-modern universe is one marked by an entreaty to enjoy – consuming the next product, fashion or even social relation that might answer a certain calling of desire (Böhm and Batta, 2010). In leadership terms, the explosion of lists, recipes, pseudo-theories and even human totems of leadership (Jack Welch, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Barack Obama, and so on) can be explained by the subject's propensity to move from one symbolic fantasy to the next: each one promising, but ultimately failing, to produce satisfaction (Driver, 2013).

We can go further than positing a theory of fantasy in relation to leadership, however, and explore the symbolic content of contemporary leadership fantasy. So when the contemporary capitalist subject dreams of leadership, what is evoked? What springs to mind is the figure of the smart (but not intellectual), health-conscious and 'ethically aware' entre- or intrapraneur, someone fine-tuned in training terms, drawing upon a range of tools and techniques to modify and make more efficient the system, but never to challenge the system itself (Žižek, 2013). Or, in more technical terms, a figure of di-

luted libidinal appeal: charismatic, but not too much; 'transformational' but not radically so; 'authentic' but only if such authenticity matches norms of liberal-capitalist ethics; collaborative but only within present ideological-political structures; 'caring' but always informed by the profit motive, and never 'naïve'; committed to policies of equal opportunity but not systemic challenging of structures of subordination and oppression.

Perhaps the answer, then, to whether leadership is a matter of person, result, position, purpose or process is that it is all and none of the above. Leadership is whatever a group of subjects makes of it within the symbolic fabric. Such a mobilisation of discourse is of course very real, holds real material consequences, as well as being rooted in a conception of subjective experience that does nothing other than circling a real – albeit a real that will remain always unattainable. The proper ethical (and professional) stance of the leadership researcher can thus be described in the following terms: studying leadership is deeply flawed at best, problematic and unethical at worst; studying 'leadership' might provide some important insight into the power relations and identifications of organisational and social subjects. In other words, following the fantasy of 'leadership' might be fruitful indeed. To adopt such a research strategy does not mean to belittle the research subject – we are all fantasising subjects – but to respect the subjectivity of the research subject: to embrace the contradictions and complexities of the enunciating subject, following the discourse and discursive positioning of the subject and respecting this talk in and of itself (Lacan, 1997).

And yet many of us are not solely leadership researchers but also activists and campaigners, at least in our private lives. Some do not accept that division between professional academic pursuit and private activism, seeking to develop a form of socially

engaged, critical-academic praxis, putting theoretical insights to use in influencing the world around us (see Grint and Jackson, 2010; Spicer et al, 2009). For these scholars, analysing a discourse, such as leadership, may be one important aspect of scholarly-public life but is also in isolation an unsatisfactory one. Yet how can it be possible to overcome the trap of fantasy: of obfuscating or romanticising mundane, or even oppressive practice?

One solution might be to dispense with leadership entirely and instead to try to deconstruct the fantasy, refusing the shorthand and being incredibly precise and descriptive about what we mean by the term. One might unpack leadership as standing for a range of other signifiers – a certain, explicitly defined conception of ethics; efficient organising; rhetorical flourish; the seeking of new collaborative partnerships; conscientious yet decisive decision-making; conflictual but salient conversation. And so on… When leadership is unpacked in this way it raises the question of whether leadership is needed at all. Wouldn't we inhabit more transparent and accountable organisations were these (and other) organisational and social constructs not poorly expressed, or concealed entirely, under a single signifier?

Another (counter-intuitive) solution might be to return to a person-led conception of leadership, albeit not in the sense of mapping traits and so on. Perhaps one consequence of viewing leadership as a fantastical signifying vessel is to hold people to account for their fantasies, for their desires. Fantasies need not be viewed in the old Marxist sense of false consciousness, as somehow inhibiting access to truth. The central Lacanian lesson is that absolute truth is inaccessible to mere mortals, who will only ever be able to traverse the fantasy, to encircle the real. As Driver (2013) and

McGowan (2013) have stated, the realm of fantasy holds great emancipatory, as well as oppressive, potential. Fantasies point to a certain limit in the way in which subjects experience the impersonal and banal of symbolic law: the rules, the norms and mundane control mechanisms that influence their lives (through language). Read in this sense, fantasies do in fact point to both the limits and possibilities of person, result, position, purpose or process in 'leadership' and might signal the possibility for the creation of a new, more accountable leadership.

People do of course act in conformity with their desires; break the constraints of the (symbolically) possible - otherwise, meaningful social change of any sort would likely be impossible, rather than simply a rarity. Bearing this in mind, it is perhaps pertinent that one of the most important, if controversial, philosophers of our time, Slavoj Žižek, has made an impassioned plea for a return of the strong leader in social and political life (Žižek, 2014). The role of the leader, for Žižek, is akin to that of the psychoanalyst in relation to the analysand. Helping the analysand (or followers) make visible the limits and contingency of the present symbolic structures of their lives becomes the core purpose. Such a conception of leading differs of course from a standard transformational/charismatic leadership identity, as the other key act of the analyst is to lead the analysand to a position where he/she sees that the analyst him/herself is a lacking construct, another fantasy. The job of the leader, in other words, is to nullify the need for a leader at all – or at least for a dominant leader-figure. Such a view of leadership bears close resemblance to the role envisaged for leader-figures in Grint's (2005b) and Heifetz's (1994) conception of leadership as a process of negotiating the meaning, importance and potential solutions for intractable problems. These positions ask that the subject breaks from symbolic convention and thinks the unconventional,

even the impossible.

Refocusing on the person in leadership, in other words, means that subjects are held accountable – they take responsibility for their own desires and their own discourse as captured in this signifier of leadership. Drawing attention back to the leader-subject (and follower-subject) means a deliberate and conscientious adoption and acceptance of the subjective position: we may never be able to fulfil our desires but we can take responsibility for following and paying heed to our desires. It may be an inevitable consequence of any floating signifier that it becomes filled in with meaning but at least refocussing on the subject(s) means that we become more reflexively aware of why and what is represented by our leadership.

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